

Making Friends with Your Subconscious in Creative Writing

By Julie Mariouw



There are such depths within us all — how do we, as writers, access and use the material that is in our subconscious minds? In her book, *Archetypes for Writers*, Jennifer Van Bergen affirms that “Writing takes place in the subconscious.... The subconscious actually operates — in everyone — as an independent mind. It perceives, processes, and retains things that never enter the conscious mind at all. We all have material in the subconscious. In fact, it is where nearly all our material is found, but that material cannot gather itself together, emerge, and become part of a

work of art (or our life) unless the conscious mind allows it.” So how do we get our conscious minds to allow it?

One helpful writing exercise is “clustering.” I came across this exercise in a book called *Writing the Natural Way*, by Gabriele Rico, Ph.D. Rico focuses on the dual-sided nature of the brain, labeling the left side the Sign mind, and the right side the Design mind. She asserts that the left side of our brain “is largely occupied with the rational, logical representations of reality and with parts and sequences”; while the right side “thinks in complex images,... seeks patterns to make designs of whatever it encounters ... your Design mind attends to the melody of life, whereas your Sign mind attends to the notes that compose the melodies. And here is the key to natural writing: the melodies must come first.”

Rico explains that “... clustering is a nonlinear brainstorming process akin to free association. It makes an invisible Design-mind process visible through a nonlinear spilling out of lightning associations that allows patterns to emerge. Through clustering we naturally come up with a multitude of choices from a part of our mind where the experiences of a lifetime mill and mingle. It is the writing tool that accepts wondering, not-knowing, seeming chaos.”

To create a cluster, you begin with a nucleus word, circled, on a blank piece of paper. You can choose any word or phrase you like. Your most important job is to write quickly, in order to bypass your internal editor. Write what comes to mind, each new word/thought in its own circle, radiating outward from the nucleus word, connecting each word with a line to the preceding circle. And, finally, after you have exhausted most possibilities, you will suddenly become aware of the direction your writing should take. Writers describe that they “just suddenly know” what they should write about.

At this point, referring back to your cluster as needed, you begin to write, as quickly as you can, without stopping to edit or correct anything. Your job as a writer is to allow your unconscious/design mind to be in the driver's seat, gradually revealing to you the patterns that it contains. Writers usually end up with a story that already has a beginning, middle, and end, and contains its own pre-determined logic and associations. Of course, you will have to continue to work with this material to expand upon and deepen it, but you have allowed some of the raw material from your subconscious brain to go down onto the page, and that is not an easy thing to do!

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Another technique for accessing your subconscious in writing is from a book called *From Where You Dream*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler; something he calls “sense journaling.” According to Butler, “... the unconscious is scary as hell. It is hell for many of us.... You have to go down into that deepest, darkest, most roiling, white-hot place ... and you can't flinch, can't walk away. That's the only way to create a work of art — even though you have plenty of defense mechanisms to keep you out of there, and those defense mechanisms are going to work against you mightily.”

How does Butler propose, then, that we bypass these defense mechanisms? He believes one way is through our senses: “The primary point of contact for the reader is going to be an emotional one, because emotions reside in the senses ... and are therefore best expressed in

fiction through the senses.” Butler believes that emotions are experienced, and therefore expressed in fiction, in five ways:

- First, we have a sensual reaction inside our body — temperature, heartbeat, muscle reaction, neural change.
- Second, there is a sensual response that sends signals outside of our body — posture, gesture, facial expression, tone of voice.
- Third, we have flashes of the past. Moments of reference in our past come back to us in our consciousness, not as ideas or analyses about the past, but as little vivid bursts of waking dream.
- Fourth, there are flashes of the future, similar to flashes of the past, but of something that has not yet happened or that may happen.
- And finally, we experience what I would call sensual selectivity. At any given moment we are surrounded by hundreds of sensual cues. But in that moment only a very small number ... will impinge on our consciousness.

So Butler proposes that we, as writers, “return to some event of the day that evoked an emotion.... Record that event in the journal. But do this only moment to moment through the senses. Absolutely never name an emotion; never start explaining or analyzing or interpreting an emotion. Record only through those five ways I mentioned.” He believes that, if you write this way every day you will help to “turn off that flow of garbage in your head, you’re turning off certain kinds of words ... abstract and analytical meta-words. What then takes their place is a very strong presence of language.... The line-to-line words come from your unconscious and so does the very form in which you write.”

Another technique to access the writer's subconscious mind is from a book called *Ensouling Language: On the Art of Nonfiction and the Writer's Life*, written by Stephen Harrod Buhner. Buhner calls the technique "finding The Secret Kinesis of Things — to minutely focus perception in a particular way... an extension of the capacity for nonphysical touch outward, into the world, and then writing down, in a specific way, what is perceived."

He instructs: "Let your eyes wander around the room until something catches your attention — desk, pen, cup; it doesn't matter what it is. It is just, for whatever reason at this moment in time, interesting to you. Now look at it carefully, note its shape, notice its color. Really look at it. Let your eyes touch the thing as if they were fingers capable of extreme sensitivity to touch. Now, ask yourself, How does it feel? In the tiny moment of time that follows that question, there will be a burst of feeling.... Your nonphysical touching has just felt a part of the exterior world.... What stands revealed is a dimension to things beyond height, width, and breadth. There is a feeling dimension to them. The Secret Kinesis of Things."

Buhner believes that "If you do this kind of exercise [regularly] you will notice that ... you forget yourself and became immersed in the writing.... You move, either lightly or deeply, into the writing trance. And, he states, 'The point of this is to begin the partnership that must exist between your conscious mind and the dreamer. To allow the dreamer to get used to being out in the open and writing. That part needs to learn that it is okay to emerge and write and that you won't do anything to harm or denigrate it.'"

It only takes practicing these skills on a regular basis to deepen and widen your writing connection with the contents of your subconscious mind; be kind and gentle with it, and it will return the favor!

Julie Mariouw is a published author, English teacher, and Amherst Writers & Artists affiliate, certified to lead workshops in the AWA method described in Writing Alone & with Others by Pat Schneider, Oxford University Press. She offers creative writing workshops for writers at all levels of skill and experience, in the Ann Arbor area, through Wellspring Writing Workshops, L.L.C. For more information, visit www.wellspringwritingworkshops.com or her Facebook page at www.facebook.com/wellspringwritingworkshops/.